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Istanbul Gezi Park Resistance Movement as Public Engagement in the Making of Place

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Abstract

Turkey has proved to be one of the fast developing countries until the end of 2013. The new intense construction activity was called “urban transformation”, for a better environment by the government, and aimed to replace the buildings that were unable to sustain earthquakes. As the transformation executed, it turned out that the buildings were functioned for excessive profit. This paper will focus on this issue in two phases. First phase exposes and spots the problems within the city of Istanbul, where author lives and documents the city as a professional photographer and artist. The second phase is an exploration on how public engagement is introduced the place-making in Istanbul. The recent Gezi Park Resistance that took place in Istanbul reflected a case of participatory, collaborative policy/ place-making efforts that were able to call for people motivation to shape their lives and cities.

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1. Urban transformation & social changes in Turkey

Turkey has proved to be one of the fast developing countries until the end of 2013. The economic boom that started to stagnate by the beginning of 2014 was accompanied by a very large construction activity, which is usually seen as the locomotive of the economy. Turkey is a country where major earthquakes took / still take place. The new intense construction activity was presented as “urban transformation” by the government, and the claim was to

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replace the worn building stock that cannot survive strong earthquakes. As the transformation developed, it turned out this building activity was intended more for excessive profit and not for better urban environments.

The buildings to be destroyed were acquired from the owners at very cheap prices; flats in newer and higher buildings that replaced the old ones were sold at least tenfold more expensive or more. Inhabitants of neighborhoods to be gentrified were never asked about their preferences, and they ended up being losers in the game, in terms of earning much less and losing their mostly natal properties, neighborhoods. In addition to such individual losses, cities of high historical significance like Istanbul were damagingly affected by this fierce, ruthless construction activity. The skylines of various neighborhoods in Istanbul started to be disrupted by high-rise buildings, and some communal green areas were relentlessly sacrificed for inhumane housing projects. This profit-based construction activity that is a major part of the recently revealed huge corruption in Turkish politics led to a world more concerned with dissimilarity, otherness and splitting up than with gathering and connection.

An urban culture is shaped by the indigenous productions coming from various areas of making such as fine arts, literature, performance arts, gastronomy, folkloric traditions and so on. In addition to providing the necessary grounds for such production; cities archive, preserve and share the outcomes with a range of institutions like museums, NGOs, foundations, institutes, and the rest. Accommodation and basic consumption are originally rural needs and providing so-called “service” only for these needs in the form of high-rise housing, shopping malls, new car-based transportation grounds cannot be considered “urban.” If a place does not generate culture but consumption only, it is not proper to define this place as a city. If the makers of culture are threatened uninterruptedly by conservatism administrations, the city stops being urban and turns into a huge rural conglomeration. The brutal consumption encouraged by governments endangers green areas, water reservoirs and turns people into slaves who cannot question anything due to the big mortgage debts they can pay off, not before decades. Though the typical alliance of religion-politics-capital claims to be conservative, nothing is conserved in at the end; cities as we remember, integral values, traditional urban corners, natural resources are all gone.



Fig. 1.Excessive construction activity in Istanbul.

This disaster-prone process is certainly not peculiar to only Turkey. “Economically driven placemaking results in the abandonment of older buildings, bulldozing of entire neighborhoods for tourism, stripping of forests, and polluting of streams — the common denominator of all forms of environmental degradation being that the most well-to-do persons reap private profits at the expense of persons with the fewest resources. As in Haussmann's Paris, those with economic and political power determine the nature and direction of growth to serve their best interests. The use of land for profits has resulted in uneven development in many cities throughout the world in which some areas of the landscape are extremely overbuilt while others are left to decay. Wealthy corporate investors (who own an increasing percentage of the landscape) influence zoning laws, specify the nature and distribution of the country's infrastructure, and determine where the biggest industries with the best jobs are located.” (Sutton, 2001) “To turn our deficiencies into assets, architects would need to adopt less hierarchical, more inclusive approaches, not only toward humanizing the landscape but also toward the social construction of knowledge about that landscape. Rather than being individualistic monument makers, we would need to engage in placemaking with communities.” (Sutton, 2001) “The subsequent celebration of the car, the construction of highways and the implementation of urban renewal and slum clearance projects destroyed countless public places and communities across America.” (Silberberg and Lorah, 2013)

2. On placemaking

According to Deborah Mills, placemaking is about “turning public spaces into public places; places which engage those who inhabit them, places through which people do not merely pass, but have reason to stop and become involved; places which offer rich experience and a sense of belonging; places in short which have meaning, which evoke pleasure or contemplation, or reflection and, most importantly, an appreciation of cultural and environmental diversity.” (Winikoff, 2000) “Placemaking often involves multi-disciplinary teams of architects, planners, designers and artists working in partnership with the people who inhabit these places to ensure that the design achieves meaning and a sense of belonging in their eyes.” (Mills, 2005)

Following the quotes above, it is possible to assert that placemaking is process oriented and reflects the societal and ecological conditions of our time, also focusing on sustainability of native values. This process rests on dynamic observation, progress evaluation and subsequent decision-making which are all phases of a self-motivated awareness against the system. In other words, “placemakers can continually tweak places to better meet the needs of their communities.” (Silberberg & Lorah, 2013) The above-mentioned awareness has to be piloted by conscious individuals who are competent to provide the local knowledge necessary in tackling issues. “A visionary project by a leader unfamiliar with the community is all but doomed to failure; placemakers need the right allies, advisers, and collaborators.” (Silberberg & Lorah, 2013) Placemaking is not dependent on universal approaches, “as an iterative process, [it] requires complexity to work in different contexts, with different communities, and for different outcomes.” (Silberberg & Lorah, 2013) Placemaking can sometimes emerge as a reaction against authoritarian centric planning and favor local, individual, flexible, spontaneous, immediate solutions to problems; in that sense it “is—and must be—chaotic like all true democratic processes.” (Silberberg & Lorah, 2013)

Placemaking is a collective act, and it reinforces relations between community members, consolidates the foundations of a culture. In other words, “the iterative actions and collaborations inherent in the making of places nourish communities and empower people. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.” (Markusen & Nicodemus, 2010)

3. Public engagement, citizen participation in the making of a place

“Participatory design is an approach to design attempting to actively involve all stakeholders (e.g. employees, partners, customers, citizens, end users) in the design process in order to help ensure the product designed meets their needs and is usable. The term is used in a variety of fields e.g. software design, urban design, architecture, landscape architecture, product design, sustainability, graphic design, planning or even medicine as a way of creating environments that are more responsive and appropriate to their inhabitants’ and users’ cultural, emotional, spiritual and practical needs. Participatory design is an approach that is focused on processes and procedures of design and is not a design style. In participatory design participants (putative, potential or future) are invited to cooperate with designers, researchers and developers during an innovation process. Potentially, they participate in several stages of an innovation process: they participate during the initial exploration and problem definition both to help define the problem and to focus ideas for solution, and during development, they help evaluate proposed solutions.” (Wikipedia, 2009)

A unique and scarce example for an architect who is socio-politically aware and involves user participation in the architectural design process is Arif Hasan, a Pakistani architect, who managed to organize local people in improving the slums of Karachi. Emphasis of the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) approach he conceived was on management of the improvement plan by the dwellers themselves, where local community is fully involved in the process of planning, implementation and maintenance of the plan. Arif Hasan taught local people how to build simple precast structural elements by designing uncomplicated molds and how to put various precast elements together in order to construct a sound and relatively decent looking houses. This way, the entire processed gets owned by the locals who carry their involvement towards the future and achieve the sustainability of the project. Doing this institutes social and political endurance and gives the people of the city an identity and self-esteem in its history. “The program proved so successful that it was adopted by the communities across developing countries. After the success of the initial phase, the program was expanded into four autonomous groups.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orangi_Pilot_Project)

Keeping the organization and collaboration scales small is one of the key dimensions of the success of projects like the Orangi Pilot Project. With manageable sizes of duties to be accomplished by the members of a community, people get more motivated for public engagement and immersion of individuals happens naturally. According to Roshigivechi and Velma Velázquez, “better designs create potential in the positive space to provoke reactions from people. To design with the intent to satisfy the function alone is no longer enough. Better design makes a space for a feeling of identity, achievement, inspiration, and joy... While immediate reflexes toward a product can seduce us, it is the overarching experience constructed from a product, and its integration into our lives that enable us to fall in love.” (Givechi & Velázquez, 2004) In summary, “Successful design connects, fulfills the need for identity, association, and community belonging.” (Givechi & Velázquez, 2004)

Personal experience, which can be obtained by active participation in solving the community issues, is one of the most important components that associate individuals to their identities. Public engagement influences contextual conditions and the context, in turn, shapes the public in a symbiotic manner. In this process, documentation and archiving of experiences are crucial in sustaining cultural heritage through integration of statistics used for research in order to understand social dynamics.

4. Cases & traditions of collective collaboration in Turkey

Informal collaboration is not a foreign notion to the lands of Turkey. Remembering the ancient Greek cultures that lived in Anatolia previously, one must refer to the concept of Agora as a “gathering place” for athletic, artistic, commercial, spiritual and political purposes. Agora had a public function both as a marketplace and a speech arena; just like Hyde Park as a much later example, famous for its “Speakers’ Corner” and democratic mass demonstrations.

“Imece” as a notion of communal work is a deep-rooted tradition in Turkey, especially in the rural areas. It can be defined as a cooperative shared individual support system with no anticipation of benefit. It means united labor by the residents of a village meant for the entire community. Put differently, “you do something for me; I do something for you with no expectation of return. In a broader sense, [it] means work done as enduring, collective reciprocal assistance.” (White, 2000) Imece is more than a tradition; it is also indirectly connected to ideology since “participation is inherently political, not in the party political sense of the word, but in the sense that it affects people's lives.” (Till, 2005)

5. Social media & virtual environments as tools of participatory making of a culture

Forms of communication and interaction are changing, expanding. Communication favors hybrid modes of presence and for this reason highly vigorous in the sense of sharing information instantly. This dynamism and omnipresence can be explained by the concept of “digital nomadism” to refer to individuals that deploy wireless digital technologies to achieve their work routines and manage their lifestyle in a roaming manner. This mobility brings individual autonomy coupled with impulsive collective connectivity when needed. In addition to sharing personal information, it is possible to form alliances using mobile communication technologies.

Peer-to-peer (P2P) communities, that share resources in the “imece” manner to enable the free exchange of files of any type, support co-creation, openness and autonomy by taking advantage of decentralization. The future aim is to ease the emergence of the peer production model that will transform the way individuals, societies interact. Equal, open, participating platforms and prototypes, able to link people directly with no intermediate agent, show tremendous potential in horizontal hierarchization of human relationships. In addition to P2P, “open source” is another collaborative notion that promotes a development model that endorses worldwide access to the free license and universal redistribution to a product’s know-how resources, together with succeeding enhancements. “Open source refers to a computer program in which the source code is available to the general public for use and/or modification from its original design. Open-source code is typically created as a collaborative effort in which programmers improve upon the code and share the changes within the community. Open source sprouted in the technological community as a response to proprietary software owned by corporations.”

When it comes to creative building in virtual 3D settings, environments like Second Life, Metaverse (collective virtual shared space), Minecraft, SimCity, etc. constitute platforms of collaborative making. Second Life provides

people integrated interface to create territories and landscapes collaboratively in real-time. Second Life is a determined virtual environment meant to be constructed by its users and “a global(ized) milieu where participants worldwide pursue interactive 3D creativity. This global platform upon which participants from many diverse backgrounds can interact, and even build collaboratively, is of added interest to the artist/author who believes that personal experience is closely associated with local culture and consequently influences the particular representations that an individual will create. No matter how hard one tries to keep away from cultural constraints in order to stay free, there is a collective memory that is embedded in our genes and that intuitively/unconsciously guides individuals when making decisions.” (Germen, 2010) Second Life is a worthwhile case in the sense that it is possible to build with no regulations, without having to conform to structural and/or aesthetical norms. Highly educated SL residents usually end up building slum-like disordered ragged habitats, while such shantytown settlements in a real world are typically connected to undereducated people in low-income societies. Remembering the seminal book titled “Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture” by Bernard Rudofsky, Second Life accommodates many examples of collective architecture designed by non-architect individuals. Another substantial occurrence of participatory making of culture in the virtual environment is the almost indispensable phenomenon of Wikipedia, which is a grand experiment in forming a collective pool of knowledge. Wikipedia defines itself as “a collaboratively edited, multilingual, free Internet encyclopedia. Volunteers worldwide collaboratively write Wikipedia's 30 million articles in 287 languages, including over 4.4 million in the English Wikipedia. Anyone who can access the site can edit almost any of its articles, which on the Internet comprise the largest and most popular general reference work.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>)

Last dimension I would like to talk about is related to two of the most indispensable components of photography: Time and space. Most of the mobile communication devices have built-in GPS modules, and consequently photos come tagged with GPS metadata, which allows locating the photo on a map with a precision that was not available before. This geo-location coding coupled with time coding refer to a space information that we can call GIS territory / GIS place/ data landscape/ GPSscape. In addition to the visual, cultural, aesthetical, artistic, social, anthropological information embedded in them directly or indirectly, photos started to convey location data as well. Esthetics can be seen as purely visual reading, yet context will always influence the way we perceive and interpret visuality in the process of making of a visual culture.

6. Public art as a tool of collective placemaking

Presence of outdoor artworks in urban settlements is a very substantial contribution to make decent urban places. Artists do not necessarily produce for and with the “public,” yet they offer citizens an opportunity of perceiving life in a manner they are not used to. Artists question things and, for this reason, make people question. Skepticism is one of the components at the core of a progressive society and public artworks that present fictional constructions enable public engagement by encouraging people to solve puzzles collectively.



Fig. 2. Mural art, Kadikoy, Istanbul.

7. Taksim Gezi Park resistance as a movement of public engagement

“The summer of 2013 was beset by endemic protests in democracies where dissatisfaction with the status quo of politics was the defining feature. The streets of Brazil, Bulgaria, and Turkey, though differed in their primary concerns, hosted floods of crowds expressing grievances. The streets were chosen as the space — not local assemblies, coffee shops or houses. In Turkey, the movements took another turn and public forums emerged.” (Yaylaci, 2013) Gezi movement can easily be considered as responsible citizens’ reaction against the Turkish ruling party AKP’s top-down decision-making involving no consultation with fellow citizens adopting individual attitudes towards public matters. AKP’s “power drunk” behavior did not hinge on the essential idea of consensus and engaged no synergy. While most people were after transparent thinking as they were laying claim to their “right to the city,” AKP continuously introduced profit-based urban projects in a dictatorial way without consulting people. The organization of Gezi Resistance was based on equal contribution and lack of hierarchy. Immediate resolutions to instant challenges were of key significance as “design is a flexible and evolving process, not a codified method, or a precise recipe you should follow on every project to ensure success. Designing means planning a process, rather than just creating a product.” (Kavlak, 2010) Non-linear procedures were preferred as opposed to typical linear ones. Self-motivated creative writing on walls as graffiti / social media posts and very high-quality unprompted humor as defense / self-motivation mechanism were phases of this conscious non-linear conduct.

Structurally robust and resilient barricade building for protection from police brutality was of utmost necessity since water cannons, and tear gas canister rifles were used as weapons to kill people, instead of appeasing them. Certain levels of engineering background that can be interpreted as “procedural knowledge” was needed in order to collectively build sturdy barricades. People experienced in managing such crises were informing and instructing protesting citizens about the functionalities of materials to be used in the barricades in order to eliminate hesitation originating from a lack of practice and foster immediate reaction. The suppleness required during the process of resistance by building protective shelters can alternatively be explained as follows: “The participation of the dweller to the design and construction processes requires a slack leeway and the [...] “flexibility by technical means suggests two further types of user creativity: constructional, a fabrication of a new space or a physical modification of an existing form, space or object, such as removing the lock from a door; conceptual, a use, form, space or object intended to be constructed, such as a door.” (Hill, 2003)

In addition to above examples, unique practices of collective placemaking were invented during the Gezi movement. Part of the opposition period coincided with Ramadan and a progressive group of people who titled themselves “anti-capitalist Muslims” proposed the fantastic idea of “Earth Iftar”, which was open-air iftar meals for breaking the fast. People in different cities of Turkey got together to sit directly on streets with others to collectively eat the food brought by individuals and laid on blankets serving as table covers. “Rainbow stairs” was yet another practice of public engagement during the Gezi confrontation. The plurality of people; with different political, religious, ethnic, social, cultural, sexual tendencies all fighting for the same notion of freedom, was very striking. People started to paint public stairs in various neighborhoods of different cities, with rainbow colors against the lack of tolerance for plurality from the government side. The rainbow colors obviously referred to advocacy of LGBT communities in Turkey and was a great instance of solidarity between different groups of people. The following quote puts it greatly: “Community is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity, but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness.” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997)



Fig. 3. Barricades built collectively for Gezi Park resistance.

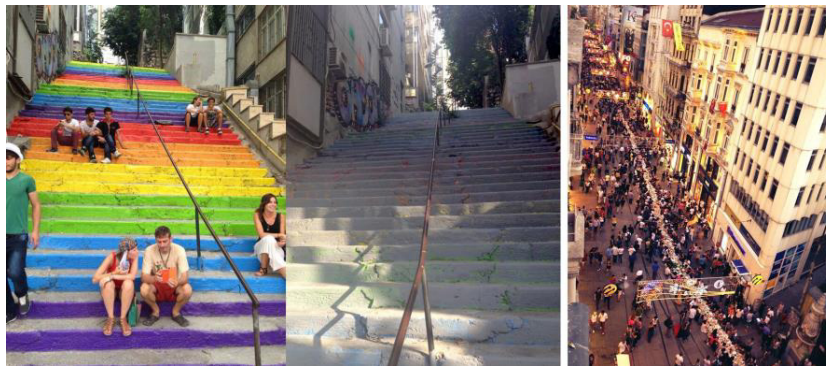


Fig. 4. Rainbow stairs and Earth Iftar. Source: anonymous.

Before finishing providing personal observations on Gezi resistance, I would like to point to one essential fact: The occupation of the entire Taksim Gezi Park for about two weeks in the model of people sleeping in their tents forming a temporary yet sustainable habitat is an opportunity “to capture the [French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu’s] notion of ‘habitus’ as a sense of one’s (and others’) place and role in the world of one’s lived environment.” (Neill, 2004)

Street actions and public engagement for protecting the public interest are basic requirements of contemporary and civilized citizenship. If the repose amidst the emergence of new forms of resistance and integration is growing ever shorter, so is the progression of inventiveness / resourcefulness, and the consortium of people concerned is noticeably much, much larger.

8. Conclusion

The recent Gezi Park movement that started by the end of May 2013 and took place in Istanbul sparked the participatory, collaborative policy/ placemaking efforts and made conscious people motivated about shaping their lives, cities. Here, the introduction of the concept of collective placemaking against dictatorial practices of profit-based construction openly challenges existing policies, rules, laws brought by the AKP rule in Turkey.

There is a need for a focus on the human constituents, interactions, collaboration and empirical, experimental learning processes rather than centrally determined procedures, constitutions, and conformance. The concept of mobility supported by facilities of mobile communication enabled by smart phones is the new mode of resistance to oppressive administrations and maintain independence from media disinformation destined to control actual agenda. Transporting this penchant for hegemonic control into the realm of building planning and design, it is possible to assert, “architecture today need no longer be considered as a monument that smothers social life. The notion that architecture is a means of controlling and incarcerating people in solitary and inflexible permanent structures should be challenged in today's networked and fluid societies. Tendencies for oppression through architecture must be challenged, and to be effective, resistance must remain alive and regenerative through collaboration.” (Cowan, 2002) “To be innovative, architects—and works of architecture themselves—must become more responsive to their users and environments. In other words, they must incorporate feedback from their physical and cultural contexts rather than relying solely on conventional analytical or internal processes of development.” (Rahim, 2006) In addition, “architecture needs to be well informed and restless, offering advanced personal environments.” (Habraken, 2007)

SugataMitra (Professor of Educational Technology at the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University, England) questions the present configuration of education where people had been / are still educated as computers of the fiscal system and proposes to terminate this functional dimension in order provide more self-sufficiency to individuals in learning what they really need to acquire for survival. He calls this new educational structure “School in the Cloud – Self-Organized Learning Environment (SOLE)” where are people are left alone to discover, decipher, convey, share information by themselves; with voluntary and introductory help from more experienced (but not professional) community members. People’s best comrades are again people themselves and not governments, corporations, state-owned institutions.

Finally, taking a look at the developments in technology, the future of personal (place)making seems to be the 3D printing apparatuses; with which individuals will be able to produce their computers, utensils, tools they can tailor exclusively for their necessities. Form follows user.

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